Victims or Victors
Job 18 - Romans 8:31-39
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"Into every life some rain must fall." That's an inncouous little cliche with which we attempt to soothe young children when a party has been cancelled. But at the same time it is a great and terrible truism about every life, young or old, rich or poor. Death and taxes may be the only absolute inevitabilities in our lives, but the odds are very high that several other semi-inevitabilities will happen to us - like serious illness, grief, deadening disappointment, professional failure - and so on. Everyone of us, some more than others, but nevertheless everyone of us, will encounter serious tragedy along our pilgrimage. Some of us have confronted a crisis recently: some of us are in the process of working through a problem right now: some of us will have the bottoms pulled out of our little worlds in the near future. It is part of life - and I am suggesting that when it happens, whatever it is, we can be either victims or victors.

Now, I have set this sermon in the context of personal tragedy or crises, because it is at this point precisely that the relevance or irrelevence of Christian faith is posited. Furthermore, while faith in Jesus Christ involves a total life style, including the good and the bad, it is when the news is bad that the Good News of the Gospel is most improtant. I would prosecute my case by directing you to two portions of scripture - one from the Old Testament, a poet's soliloquy about a man named Job; the other from the New Testament, penned by a man who knew the power of God's love in the midst of tragedy; namely St. Paul.

Any discussion of tragedy that seeks to be faithful to the Biblical witness must ultimately come to grips with the story of Job. I am always pleasently surprised to hear people in the hospital express a certain encouragement and comfort derived from their observation of people who are sicker than they are. I think it is a mark of strength and sensitivity, "No matter how bad things are, someone else is having it worse."

The story of Job serves in this capacity. If you think you have problems you haven't seen anything till you hear about Job.

Job was a good man; a devout and pious man who served the Lord, who was loved by his family and esteemed by his collegues - but one day, Job's life came crashing in upon him. A series of messengers came to Job with the news that three raids by bandits had resulted in the theft of all of his oxen, asses, sheep and camels, and that everyone of his servants had been slain. A man of considerable wealth suddenly had absolutely nothing. And if this were not enough, even while the third messenger was telling his story, another appeared to report that a violent wind storm had flattened the house in which his sons and daughters were eating and that they were all dead.

Job comment: "Naked I came from my mothers' womb, and naked I shall return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

But his troubles were not over. For Job was afflicted with "loathsome sores" from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. And we see him - totally humiliated, crushed - nothing left - not even the personal dignity of worthfulness - sitting in a pile of ashes, scratching his sores.

Three friends came to Job, and after sitting andmourning with him for a week, attempt to explain to him why all of this has happened. But it doesn't work; nothing fits. The traditional answers to the question of suffering are flat and stale. It is unfortunate that by some gross misunderstanding of the story Job

has come to be recognized as a patient man, because he wasn't patient at all. He wanted answers. He wanted answers from his friends and when they failed he turned to God.

Through several discourses we hear him asking: "What are the charges against me? What have I done to deserve this? If only I could know why, I would be at peace." It has a contemporary ring about it: You and I are very much inclined to experience these feelings - and sometimes express them. When life disintigrates we are bewildered and confused. When things happen that hurt us, and for which there are no easy answers we experience anxiety. Sometimes we experience a depression so deep it borders on despair, something Keirkegaard called "sickness unto death." Like Job we can summon the strength to stand up under the onslaught of tragedy and grief, but we want an answer.

The 38th chapter begins with God's response to Job's questions:
"Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind. 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me.'

It appears that Job is not about to receive answers to his questions, but instead will become the object of a searching interogation:
"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements? Surely you know."

Relentlessly, almost mockingly, the questioning continurs:
"Have you commanded the morning since your days began? And caused the dawn to know its place? Have the gates of death been revealed to you? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare if you know all this."

We can feel real sympathy for Job at this point. Desparate, isolated, ruined financially, his children dead, he now finds himself rebuked and chided by God himself. And yet the whole point of the Job story is that it is here, at this lowest ebb when God himself appears to be against him, that Job finds his faith.

Job was the victim of the harshest treatment life can deal to man. He stood through it all: but he thought he could emerge the victor if only he had answers. That was his mistake. He had to learn the lesson which you and I are so reluctant to accept - that there are no answers to many of life's most difficult questions. With his relentless, humiliating questions God taught Job that as long as he depended on reasonable explainations for everything that happened he would wallow in anxiety - because there are no such answers. God taught Job that true faith begins when we peer into the dark void and say, "I believe: I trust."

The discourses of Job conclude: "Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know. I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see thee." In other words, Job found the faith he thought he had, not when he received answers to all his questions, but precisely when he finnlly acknowledged that no answers were to be had. At that moment faith was born in Job. At that moment he became the victor rather than the victim: at that moment - when he realized that faith is trust in God - regardless of what has happened or what is happening.

It's a beautiful poem; and an enduring truth Nels Ferre has captured its essence in this sentence: "The fulfilled spirit knows the joy of resting in God in the midst of trouble, of struggling, of suffering and even of defeat and death." [The Finality of Faith, p. 67]

Countless people, down through the centuries, have been led by this story to place their trust in God; in Ferre's phrase - to experience the "joy of resting in

God". But there is more: there is another word. If the "Victim or Victor" suggestion has any validity, the Job story probably brings us down somewhere between the two: somewhere at the point of courage or endurance - but something less than victory.

St. Paul provided the further, and distinctly Christian word. He had been in jail several times, beaten, flogged, humiliated, separated from all his possessions - and ultimately would die a martyrs' death. But he could write: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

That kind of thinking takes us past the point of mere endurance. It suggests that the God to whom we turn in time of trouble is supremely a God of love. It announces that nothing life does to us alters the love of God for us. And that love can transform us from pathetic victims into Victors.

That is the Good News of the Gospel.. That is the point at which Christian FAith confronts us at our deepest, most desparate, need. In fact, it is so good that we have difficulty accepting it. I think one of the most difficult theological concepts for us to handle is the idea that the love of God is not a protective device which shelters us from harm and tragedy; but rather an enabling device which gives us the power to emerge victorious from whatever happens to us. Everyone of us has confronted tragedy and wanted to shout in the face of God - "Why me? Why this?" Everyone of us has felt that life is empty of meaning and that we are alone in a dark void. And the Good News of the Gospel is that the love of God is with us - even there, in that dark void; that it can and will transform the darkness of the present into the bright light of dawn.

Basic to all of this is the concept of love as a transforming power. That's how Paul understood it, and I think we know something about it too. As parents we can't do very much to alter the circumstances that have resulted in unhappiness or hurt for our children. They come to us - insulted by a friend, or physically hurt or crushed by an incident at school. And instinctively we gather them in our arms, loving them, assuring them, supporting them. And our love becomes a transforming power. The situation hasn't changed - but the person has. Love turns a victim into a victor.

A man can be knocked down every day, disappointed in his aspirations, a failure in his plans - but the love of his wife can literally be a transforming power - to which he can retreat - and from which he can derive the strength to carry on another day.

God is like that: the love of God expressed in Jesus Christ is that kind of power; power to transform victims into victors.

Claude A. Wesley, principal of a Negro elementary school in Birmingham, Alabama drove his little girl to Sunday School one Sunday morning, dressed in her best. She never came home. This is what Mr. Wesley said: "I drove Cynthia to Sunday School and went to get some gasoline for my car. I was just a few blocks away when I heard the explosion. I knew it was our church. I rushed back but I could not find Cynthia. I wanted to think that she had left the church, but someone told me I'd better go to the hospital. There they asked me what she was wearing. I told them a little class ring. They pulled out her hand and I saw the ring. Then I saw her patent leather shoes and white socks and I said, 'That's her.' I have not asked why it happened to us. I don't feel bitter about it....."
[from Interpreting the Times, The Protestant Hour, 1967, George T. Peters]

That man was a victor. That man had heard the Gospel, in a way all of us need to hear it; the Gospel summarized by St. Paul -

"For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things to come, nor powers, nor heighth, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen.